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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC KPAL SY IS IR LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: WITH 12 DAYS TO GO, MARCH 14 PUTS ON A
UNITED FRONT

REF: BEIRUT 577

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a strong last-minute show of unity, just 12 days before the June 7 parliamentary elections, March 14 leaders met at the Bristol Hotel on May 26, presenting a joint communique outlining the coalition's positions on key issues.

The communique expressed support for UNSCR 1701 and the Special Tribunal, and called for one army with the exclusive authority to defend Lebanon and liberate it from the "Israeli enemy". March 14 figures had postponed this meeting in order to respond to Hizballah SYG Nasrallah's Liberation Day speeches (reftel), and they added language to the final communique on Israel and liberation to steal some of Hizballah's thunder. They refrained from adopting Hizballah's fiery rhetoric, instead advocating a peaceful vision for Lebanon. End summary.

MARCH 14 PUTS ON UNITED FRONT

¶2. (C) March 14 leaders put on a show of unity at the Bristol Hotel the evening of May 26, just 12 days before the June 7 parliamentary elections. The hotel was a symbolic choice as it was the site of the so-called "Bristol Gathering," a group of anti-Syrian leaders that first met on December 13, 2004 in support of UNSCR 1559, and later developed into the March 14 coalition following the February 2005 assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri. All March 14 leaders were present, including majority leader Saad Hariri, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, Kataeb leader Amine Gemayel, and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. Nayla Mouawad, Boutros Harb, Dory Chamoun, Robert Ghanem, Carlos Edde, Nayla Tueni and others also attended.

¶3. (C) March 14 Secretariat SYG Fares Souaid, Secretariat member Samir Franjieh, and Baabda candidate Elias Abi Assi provided Pol/Econ Chief and Senior LES Political Advisor a readout of the meeting on May 27. According to Souaid, the overall tone and message of the meeting was good, as well as the turnout and resulting photo op, and the (normally squabbling) coalition succeeded in displaying a unified front

for the elections. With the unity that was displayed, "now no one will ask why vote for a coalition that ends June 7," he argued. The leaders met for about 40 minutes before March 14 SYG Fares Souaid read a joint communique, signed by the leaders and approximately 100 other March 14 members.

¶4. (C) The communique declared March 14's solidarity throughout the elections, its support for UNSCR 1701, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, and, without mentioning Hizballah directly, "one army, that follows one authority which has the sole right to keep weapons, defend the country and liberate the land from the Israeli enemy." Souaid, who had previously told us March 14 had postponed the Bristol gathering until after Nasrallah's speeches commemorating Lebanon's May 25 Liberation Day (reftel) to allow March 14 an opportunity to respond, told us that the language "Israeli enemy" had been added, as well as a reference to "Lebanese consensus", after Nasrallah's speech. At the same time, the communique advocated a peaceful vision for Lebanon.

¶5. (C) Comment: In recent weeks, Hizballah has used the arrests of dozens of alleged Israeli spies and upcoming Israeli military exercises to rally voters against a perceived Israeli threat. March 14's communique was, in effect, an effort to steal some of Hizballah's thunder to show that the opposition is not the only side that is tough on Israel. End comment.

¶6. (C) The communique indirectly attacked Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun, accusing him of plotting a coup against the state and the 1989 Taif Accord by advocating giving Christians, Sunnis, and Shia each one-third of the

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governing power (in direct contrast with Taif, which maintains a 50-50 Christian-Muslim split). Aoun has vehemently denied this, accusing March 14 of spreading this rumor to discredit him among Christian voters.

BUT SOME FRICTION REMAINS

¶7. (C) Souaid noted that the Bristol meeting was held at the same time as a cabinet meeting (septel), conveniently giving March 14 Minister of State Nassib Lahoud an excuse not to attend. Lahoud sent Tripoli MP and independent candidate Mosbah Ahdab to represent his Democratic Renewal party. Ahdab told us the Bristol meeting was "apparently" good, explaining that he still sensed underlying tensions between the March 14 leaders. (Note: Geagea told PolOff at a lunch hosted by the Ambassador, septel, that the mood was "very tense." End note.)

JUMBLATT COMMITTED
TO MARCH 14, BUT...

¶8. (C) Souaid relayed that Druze leader Walid Jumblatt appeared solidly on board with March 14 during the gathering, remaining calm and stressing the need for March 14 to continue its confrontation with Syria and Hizballah. At the same time, however, Jumblatt feared the recent "Der Spiegel" article (reftel) implicating Hizballah in the Hariri assassination would spark Sunni-Shia tensions in Lebanon. (Note: March 14 thus far has refrained from using the article to attack Hizballah, cognizant that this could incite conflict and eventually backfire against the coalition. End note.)

¶9. (C) During the Bristol meeting, Jumblatt blamed himself for pushing the March 14 cabinet in May 2008 to crack down on Hizballah's fiber optics network and airport security, in an apparent attempt to defuse tensions. However, Saad (whom we are told was acting "paternally," more like his father Rafiq than himself) told him they all shared the blame, since it

was a March 14 government that made the decision. Souaid expressed concern to us that Jumblatt, during a scheduled May 28 appearance on Marcel Ghanem's popular political talk show "Kalam el-Nas," planned to assume personal responsibility for the May events. In their view, this would appear as justification for Hizballah's armed reaction on May 7, 2008.

INDEPENDENTS STAY AWAY

¶10. (C) According to Souaid, the only independent candidate who attended was Metn candidate Elias Moukheiber. Others running with March 14 such as Edmond Gharios and Salah Honein were invited to the gathering but did not attend. Michel Murr, an independent heavyweight aligned with March 14 in Metn, did not attend. Former Hariri advisor Ghattas Khoury was also a no-show.

¶11. (U) Following is Embassy translation of the communique read by Souaid. Begin text.

Lebanese,

We all are in the core of a decisive battle that would determine Lebanon's future. We pledge we would run these elections united and in solidarity with each other.

We shall run it united :

¶11. In order to have in Lebanon a one sovereign state and capable of taking decisions,

¶12. In order to have one legitimacy in Lebanon based on the Constitution which was accepted by all Lebanese,

¶13. In order to have in Lebanon one army, that follows one authority which has the sole right to keep weapons, defend the country and liberate the land from the Israeli enemy. One army capable of implementing UNSCR 1701 and imposing the

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commitment to the armistice agreement,

¶14. In order to maintain Lebanon a country of dialogue and partnership between Christians and Muslims based on the rule laid down by the Taif agreement, and not a rule based on the one third principle,

¶15. In order to maintain Lebanon as a country for all its citizens, not a transitory country under the slogan of &one people in two countries,⁸ and not for keeping Lebanon as a platform for regional bargaining,

¶16. In order for the state to regain the Lebanese land based on Lebanese consensus which had contributed to the liberation of the land on May 25, 2000,

¶17. In order to maintain Lebanon with its Arab identity, as stipulated in the Constitution, and not the spearhead in confronting the Arab world;

¶18. In order to keep justice as a guarantor for all and the special tribunal to reach its goal in uncovering the truth,

¶19. In order to keep the Palestinian cause away from the danger of resettlement and outside tutorships.

Lebanese,

Your freedom, your right for determining your destiny and internal peace is above all matters. Together we defended these principles and shall continue defending them. We shall confront the plan for a coup against the state and the Taif agreement. You are the decision makers. Saving Lebanon and regaining your decisive role in the independence march lies in your hands and your fee vote. This march started with the Bkirke appeal in July 2000 and was baptized with the blood of Rafiq Hariri and al the martyrs of the cedar revolution and all of Lebanon.

Your choice is decisive:

--Decisive in protecting civil peace
--Decisive in deterring confessional and sectarian conflicts

that threatens us as well as the Arab and Islamic world
--Decisive in containing the impact of the global financial
crisis
--Decisive in protecting Lebanon and securing a peaceful and
secure future for our children.

SISON